

Engaging Young Readers with Text through Shared Reading Experiences

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This article explores Shared Reading as an instructional approach that mimics home reading experiences in a group setting for young children. The article includes information about how to use enlarged text as the teacher provides experiences with books that first focus on the meaning and enjoyment of the story and then shifts to how print works and conventions that enhance the meaning of the story. The importance of being able to see the print in enlarged text that allows the teacher to extend the read aloud experience to include viewing print in big books and charts establishing the beginnings of visual attention to letters, words, and punctuation is examined.

Shared reading is a form of “reading along” (McGill-Franzen, 2006) with children that helps them move from the emergent stage of reading to conventional reading of text. Based on our own classroom experiences, we see shared reading experiences as an effective classroom tool. Much has been written about the use of shared reading in first and second grade (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Taberski, 2000) yet it remains an untapped form of reading experience for pre-K and kindergarten children where read aloud is much more common. Shared reading can be used to assist in literacy growth for children ages three through six, as teachers provide reading opportunities that foster the early stages of literacy development. “*Shared Reading* is a collaborative literacy learning activity based on the research of Don Holdaway” (Parkes, 2000, p.1). Shared reading in school emulates and builds from the child’s experiences with bedtime or lap stories at home (Holdaway, 1979). The children in a group “share” the reading of the story with the teacher through the use of enlarged text (Parkes, 2000). According to New Zealander, Margaret Mooney (1990), children learn about reading by seeing and hearing reading in their everyday lives in much the same way they learn to talk. Shared reading enables teachers to model a form of reading which some, but not all, children experience through bedtime stories with parents or caregivers. Shared reading is a step between reading aloud and children doing their own reading (Parkes, 2000).

The Basics of Shared Reading

The following is a description of the activities you might observe or plan for during a shared reading experience with children:

1. The teacher orients the children to the text to help them develop schema for the topic.
2. The teacher reads the text using a pointer to help the children track the print while reading.
3. During the reading, the teacher invites the children into text discussion through the use of “I wonder” statements.
4. Over several days, the teacher and the children reread the text. Each time the children notice new features of the text and participate more actively in the reading.
5. Over time the children become independent readers of the text.

This article presents three examples of shared reading experiences. In each you will see how the teacher provides children with different learning opportunities depending on the purpose for the particular reading. First, we provide the classroom examples that demonstrate the ways classroom teachers use shared reading to develop literacy understandings with their students. Next, we provide information about how to develop shared reading lessons that are both developmentally and instructionally appropriate. In addition, we provide data from semi-structured interviews with teachers currently using shared reading as an instructional method which each considers appropriate for the children in their classes.

Teaching a Specific Concept

In this example of a first reading of an enlarged text from a preschool class of three and four year olds the teacher used the “big book” version of the children’s story *Mouse Paint* by Ellen Stoll Walsh (1995). The text allows all the children to see the book and participate actively in the reading with guidance from the teacher:

T: Friends, We are going to finish our Mouse Paint book today. We got all the way to the color purple. (Pointing to the color chart)

T: Red and blue make (pause)

C: Purple (shouting together)

T: Red and yellow make (pause)

C: Orange (shouting together)

T: Blue and yellow make (pause)

C: Green

T: You really know all about colors! Let's finish our book today! (Pointing to the title of the big book on her lap) Do you know what this book is called?

C: Mouse Paint!!!!

T: By Ellen Stoll Walsh, are you ready? "Once there were ...

C: Three (shouting together)

T: "white mice on a ..."

C White (shouting together)

T: "piece of paper. The..."

C: Cat (shouting together)

T: "Couldn't find them."

The children and the teacher engage in the shared reading lesson in order to learn about mixing primary colors to create secondary colors through the story of mice that jump into jars of paint and the cat who is watching them. This lesson is first and foremost about the meaning of the story and the development of the concept of color.

As with home bedtime stories, *Mouse Paint* (Stoll-Walsh, 1995) will be shared many times over in the classroom and each time the children will be excited about the story. The children will notice new and different things about the book as the story becomes more and more familiar and their minds are freed to attend to other features of the book. The nature of the interaction is unique each time it occurs because the children notice different things about the book. The adult and the children "talk their way" through the book as they read together, look at the pictures, and notice different aspects of each. There are often "this reminds me off" conversations that take participants away from the book for a brief time. The children can see the book so there are also comments about the text itself. Why are the letters so big? That is a letter in my name? What does that mark mean? Holdaway (1979) describes the shared reading experience as having three stages: discovery (a new listening experience), exploration (rereading with increased unison participation), and independent (rereading and expressive activity surrounding the story).

Extending the Meaning

The most important understanding for children to gain from shared reading is that stories are meaningful. Thus first interactions to occur during shared reading have to do with the story itself. How do we relate to the meaning of stories? We relate because of how the story related to our own lives. Text to self connections (Keene & Zimmerman, 1996) are often first to occur to the reader. In this second example from the same preschool classroom reading *Mouse Paint* (Stoll-Walsh, 1995) on another day, one of the children comments, “My mom painted my room the same color as my favorite shirt.” Another child recalls, “I got in trouble when I got paint on my shoes. I would really be in trouble if I got paint all over me like the mice.” Another child made a text to text connection (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997) regarding the number of mice in the story, saying “Teacher, remember when you read us about the three blind mice?” Miss Bailey also followed up with the book and a color chart when the children made paintings creating colors of their own at the easel. When they shared their art work, the conversation centered on how they were just like the mice, text to world linkages (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). When teachers encourage these conversations, children will grow and play an increasingly active role as meaning makers. Grand conversation is a term used to describe the extended discussion surrounding text when children investigate the big ideas and reflect on their feelings about the reading (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Peterson & Eeds, 1990). These child centered discussions occur during the rereading of the text while the teacher sometimes guides the children to notice ideas they may not notice themselves during previous story conversations.

Noticing Features of Print

Once children have a basic understanding of the meaning of the story and have noticed many of the nuances of the story meaning, there are other opportunities for the teacher to call attention to interesting features of the story. In Miss Joanne’s classroom of five and six year olds, the children were reading the *Little Yellow Chicken* (Cowley, 1996). They had already discussed the connection between this book and the story of *The Little Red Hen* (Galdone, 1973). The teacher then drew the children’s attention to how the characters talked to the Little Yellow Chicken. This led to a look at print features like quotation marks and commas to show the reader how to read the text, making the connection between oral language and written language. The teacher also worked with phrased and fluent reading at the same time. The children could be

heard later that day during independent reading, reading just like the characters in the book. This provided them with a resource to be able to say to each other, “Read this just the way the bug in *The Little Yellow Chicken* sounded.”

Preparing for a Shared Reading Lesson

Shared reading does not operate in a vacuum. It is a part of a classroom literacy framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). For the youngest children, this framework includes interactive read aloud, interactive writing, and shared writing in addition to shared reading. These are the literacy components which offer the most support from the teacher (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Immersing children in daily literacy experiences through opportunities orchestrated by the teacher creates a learning environment that sets the expectation that this is what young children do as they explore the connections between the oral language they use daily and the world of written language. Typically shared reading is done with a group of children in a space where they can sit together comfortably and see the text. Within this physical setting the goal is to create an intimate and comfortable space. The teacher uses enlarged text in the form of big books, charts, or posters. Some are purchased and others are made by the teacher or the class during interactive writing. Other useful materials are an easel to display the reading material, pointers, whiteboard with markers, wiki sticks, highlight tape, magnetic letters, sentence strips, an alphabet chart, word frames, masking cards, and sticky notes (Parkes, 2000; Payne, 2005).

The most important feature of shared reading is the book / text itself; with the goal of engagement, interaction, and active thinking by the readers. When selecting text for shared reading the teacher needs to consider:

- Interests of the children
- Varied kinds of reading material the children will enjoy
- Physical characteristics of text: size and spacing of print, clarity of illustrations, layout
- Story line and familiarity with the experience
- Language that provides entry points for participation (Parkes, 2000).

With these features considered, the teacher needs to read the selected text several times with the audience in mind. What will the children notice? What connections are possible for this group of children? Where will the teacher pause, wonder, and invite interaction? Where will the text draw the children in to read along? How can the book be used to help the children feel like

readers? In the previous examples of the class interactions with the books *Mouse Paint* (Stoll-Walsh, 1995) and *The Little Yellow Chicken* (Cowley, 1996) the teachers had attached sticky notes in the text as reminders of places in the text that would be useful during that day's reading of the text. As the teachers read, they moved the note to the easel so as not to distract the children as the reading continued. During rereading of shared books, the teacher will have different goals for the sharing of the text always returning to the pleasure of the story and always providing opportunities for the noticing of the children as teachable moments. In addition to these planned experiences the children need access to these shared books at other times of the day so the text can be explored independently and for new noticing to occur based on individual observation.

Data Collection from Teachers Using Shared Reading

One way to understand teacher perspectives about classroom instruction is to conduct semi-structured interviews (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) of those actually using a particular instructional method, in this case, shared reading. This qualitative research method provided the interviewees the opportunity to talk in depth about shared reading guided by our open-ended questions. We conducted the interviews with the intention of adding to our understanding of shared reading from our own teaching experiences. We began each interview by sharing a statement about our own experiences using shared reading and by asking the teachers to help us understand their own use of the method. We asked the teacher to indicate why she used shared reading in her classroom and what literacy understandings could be developed for young children using shared reading. Follow up questions were used when needed to clarify the teachers' responses. The interviews were conducted with three teachers: One preschool teacher, one kindergarten teacher, and one first grade teacher. We decided later to focus our analysis to the preschool and kindergarten teach due to our limited teaching experience in these two grades. Each interview was forty-five minutes long and was audio-taped. We then transcribed the interviews and the data was analyzed to explore for both common themes and unique perspectives from the teachers. We were particularly curious to learn if ages of children taught by the two teachers provided any unexpected responses.

Classroom Teachers Commenting on Shared Reading

When looking at shared reading as a literacy experience for young children, it is important to consider why it is an appropriate experience to offer. Data collected from pre-K and kindergarten teachers in semi-structured interviews suggested the evolving nature of learning through shared reading experiences for young children when analyzed. First, children can build from their oral language to print experiences through carefully selected books they can both hear and see, offering regular demonstrations of the reading process. “My students are at all different places in their reading ability. So when I do a shared reading lesson I focus on what they know and need to learn” (Kindergarten teacher). In addition, shared reading can benefit all learners. “Half of my students are on an IEP for special education and half of my students are typically developing students. I think shared reading helps all types of readers” (Preschool teacher). Shared reading changes in focus based on the needs of the children. “I use our class name chart and we read it over and over again. Then around late September, we start comparing the beginning letters in the name chart. Then they learn how language rhymes and to figure out words that are missing in rhyming stories” (Pre-school teacher). Finally, when considering specific literacy opportunities to offer during shared reading, teachers focus on these areas of literacy knowledge:

- Using all sources of information available in the text
- Making meaning from text and exploring connections
- Developing phrased and fluent sounding reading
- Exploring specific text features
- Recognizing familiar, high-frequency words
- Seeing reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing as interrelated.

It was interesting to note the variety of materials the teachers used during their shared reading lessons. Materials included commercially published big books, poems and charts, and materials such as the class name list or materials written by the children during interactive writing.

Final Thoughts

As young readers have many experiences with books at home and at school, they will change and develop through each opportunity. One way that teachers of young children can

provide experiences for groups of children in their classrooms is through shared reading experiences that model home literacy in a group setting. Children will stimulate each other, learn social skills, and have others to talk with about engaging print of varied forms. Regardless of the entry point in the experience children can benefit from these book experiences and will return to books and reading many times during their lifetime as readers. Based on the data collected from teachers and our own observation and use of shared reading, teachers of young children who consider the following points can provide engaging and developmentally appropriate literacy experiences for young children:

- What are the interests of the children?
- What kinds of reading material will the children enjoy?
- How do the illustrations of this text support the development of text meaning?
- How can I use the language of the text to encourage reading participation?
- What entry points does the text provide for in-class discussion?

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